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House Homeland Security Subcommittee on
Transportation Security and Infrastructure Protection
"An Assessment of Security Checkpoints at Airports:
Are Our Airports Keeping Passengers Safe?"
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On behalf of the American Association of Airport Executives (AAAE) and the thousands of men and women the Association represents who manage and operate primary, commercial service, reliever, and general aviation airports across the country, I want to thank the subcommittee for the opportunity to participate in this important hearing to assess passenger security checkpoints. Airport executives appreciate your interest in this topic, and we are eager to work with Congress, the Department of Homeland Security, and the Transportation Security Administration to ensure the success of ongoing efforts to upgrade the equipment and protocols in place at screening checkpoints across the country.

While responsibility for passenger and baggage screening are by law the sole responsibility of TSA, airports play a critical role in partnering with the agency to help it meet those core missions. The significant changes that have taken place in airport security since 9/11 have been aided dramatically by the work of the airport community, and we look forward to continuing to serve as a partner to the agency as it seeks to upgrade its checkpoint capabilities in the wake of the attempted Christmas Day attack on Flight 253.

In addition to partnering with TSA to help the agency meet its passenger and baggage screening mandates, airports as public entities with public safety as a key mission, also perform a number of inherently local security-related functions at their facilities, including incident response and management, perimeter security, employee credentialing, access control, infrastructure and operations planning, and numerous local law enforcement and public safety functions. These critical public safety duties have long been local responsibilities that have been performed by local authorities in accordance with federal standards under federal oversight. Airport operators meet their security-related obligations not with an eye on profit or loss but with a sharp focus on the need to secure public safety, which remains one of their fundamental missions.

With that as background, let me begin by complementing DHS and TSA for their swift response to the attempted Christmas Day attack and for the efforts undertaken since that time to engage airports on charting a course forward – particularly as it relates to the wide-scale deployment of Advanced Imaging Technology (AIT) at airport checkpoints. As the subcommittee is well aware, the agency has greatly expedited plans to deploy AIT equipment, with some 500 machines expected to be deployed by the end of 2010 and another 500 scheduled to follow in 2011. Many airports are eager to have AIT equipment in their facilities in recognition of the security benefits this technology provides in detecting threats highlighted by the Christmas Day attack.

DHS Secretary Janet Napolitano, TSA Acting Administrator Gale Rossides, and the senior leadership at the department and at TSA have made concerted efforts to include AAAE and other industry groups in discussions regarding AIT deployment plans and to seek airport input on how best to move forward. In particular, I want to complement and thank TSA Assistant Administrator Robin Kane, who is testifying today, for his practical, results-driven approach and for his efforts to seek input from airport management at key stages in the initial planning process.

Airports are Cautiously Optimistic about AIT Deployment but Have Concerns
Airport executives are encouraged by these early outreach efforts on AIT deployment and commend the agency for the thorough work that has been undertaken to this point with general checkpoint designs and deployment strategies. While careful planning at headquarters is certainly important, the greatest challenges lie ahead as TSA attempts to move from the drawing board to the "real world" at hundreds of widely divergent airport facilities across the country with the deployment and operation of AIT equipment.

Beyond the limited number of airports that currently have or are scheduled to soon receive AIT equipment, TSA's outreach efforts have not yet been widely extended to individual airports to discuss specific plans for deployment of equipment at their facilities, leaving many airport executives with significant concerns about potentially costly structural modifications that may be necessary to accommodate AIT equipment in already crowded airport terminals. Additionally, airports have questions about the ability of TSA to efficiently process passengers through updated checkpoints given the size of the new machines, the number of TSA personnel required to operate them, the slower throughput levels of the machines relative to existing magnetometers, and significant changes to divestiture procedures for passengers. These challenges will become more acute as passenger levels continue to rise at airports across the country.

To this point, TSA maintains that there will be minimal impact on the checkpoint footprint and on passenger throughput levels through screening checkpoints – particularly at the airports slated to receive the 500 machines scheduled for delivery during 2010. Airport executives believe that TSA is earnest in its view that it has considered these issues, and we readily acknowledge that there won't be significant challenges at every airport. With that said, it is evident that placing new equipment, building image viewing rooms, and accommodating teams of new personnel in already crammed checkpoint screening areas will be difficult if not impossible at some critical airports across the country. TSA has acknowledged that the agency will face challenges, particularly in 2011, as they move toward the end of the deployment schedule.

Unfortunately, TSA has yet to begin planning to tackle some of these issues, which we believe are inevitable. Looking forward to 2011 – the budget year that Congress is currently considering – the agency has requested significant resources to procure and install AIT equipment ($215 million) and to support the additional 5,355 TSO positions the agency says are necessary to operate the AIT machines ($315 million). The Administration has not, however, requested funding to pay for either the space or terminal modifications that may be necessary at airports to accommodate AIT equipment. Administration officials have made clear their view that airports should be required to pay for some if not all of these costly items.

Previous Efforts Illustrate the Importance of Airport Involvement and Federal Funding
To understand the pitfalls of moving forward with the wide-scale deployment of technology in the airport environment without adequate airport consultation at the local level and in the absence of sufficient federal funding, one need only to consider the experiences with TSA's roll-out of explosives detection systems (EDS) for checked baggage earlier this decade. Insufficient airport involvement at individual facilities with the planning, design, and deployment of that equipment and a lack of federal funding to support critical project elements led to "temporary" solutions at numerous airports with bulky machines being placed in crowded airport terminal areas – a situation that created numerous safety, security, and efficiency issues. As the subcommittee knows well, we've spent the better part of the past eight years trying to clean up the mess at great expense, and we still don't have it right in many locations.

Airports have seen this movie before, Madam Chair, and we don't like the ending. The good news is that we are at the beginning of the AIT deployment process with the opportunity to get it right this time around. Along those lines, we offer several specific recommendations for your consideration:

Give Airports a Direct Role in Developing and Approving AIT Deployment Plans: Airports have long supported the expedited deployment of advanced technology as a means of enhancing security and efficiency, and airports are generally enthusiastic about the deployment of AIT equipment at their facilities. Airports also believe strongly that individual airport authorities must be actively involved in the planning and design of projects at their facilities to ensure upgrades are completed in a timely manner and in a way that limits disruptions to checkpoint operations and costly terminal modifications.

Airport professionals have a unique understanding of their facilities and should be counted on as a resource as TSA seeks to deploy technology at checkpoints or other areas of an airport. In addition to their expertise as facility managers, airport professionals share the same public safety mission as the federal government and should be relied on as a full partner in these efforts.

In recognition of those facts and in an effort to ensure that the consultation and airport involvement at the local level is meaningful and productive, we encourage the subcommittee to consider giving airport authorities a direct role in developing and approving deployment plans at their facilities. Such a move will ensure that TSA and its contractors are working directly with airports to establish realistic plans that take into account unique facility and operational considerations. Careful coordination and cooperation between the federal government and airport operators is the key to the successful deployment of technology in the airport environment.

Require TSA to Pay for Space & Terminal Modifications Necessary to Accommodate AIT:
Not surprisingly, airport executives are very concerned about a lack of federal funding to support the acquisition of space and costly terminal modifications that will likely be necessary to accommodate AIT equipment in numerous airport locations. As all of you know as frequent travelers, many airport terminals are already at their breaking point in terms of space, and adding bigger machines, personnel, and image viewing rooms – among other necessary changes – will likely require significant terminal modifications.

Given the acknowledged importance of these projects to national security, airport executives believe that it is imperative that the federal government step up to the plate to finance necessary space acquisition and terminal modifications required to accommodate AIT equipment. The current assumption that airports should be responsible for those significant expenses ignores reality.

Setting aside the fact that passenger and baggage screening are the direct responsibility of the federal government, airport financing simply isn't feasible at most airports – many of which have already deferred major capital projects because of economic realities. Plowing new resources into helping the federal government meet its obligations in this area would take even more money away from critical safety and capacity-enhancing projects and put an additional burden on our partners in the airline industry for an item that everyone acknowledges is necessary for homeland security. I would also note that airports collectively have already invested billions of dollars over the past decade on a number of important security improvements at perimeters and throughout the airport environment and to assist TSA in its passenger and baggage screening efforts.

In our view, federal funding for space and terminal modifications are unlikely to materialize without support from Congress. That fact is evident to us based on budget documents and recent discussions with key department and agency leaders. With that in mind, we urge the subcommittee to push for changes requiring TSA to pay for these critical project elements. Without adequate federal support, we face a situation where deployment decisions could be based on where machines can be accommodated easily in airports as opposed to where they make sense from a security perspective.

It is worth noting that in the case of checked baggage systems, TSA acknowledged the problems that a lack of federal funding would create with its deployment plans and initially supported paying for terminal modifications and other costs through a multi-year letter of intent (LOI) process that was created with the strong support of Congress. Unfortunately, the important LOI program was opposed by the Office of Management and Budget, and an important tool in financing projects was left unutilized – a result that slowed the deployment of in-line baggage systems at airports across the country. Those experiences illustrate the importance of placing a provision in law that requires TSA to pay for space and terminal modifications in airports necessary to accommodate AIT equipment.

Proactively Address Passenger Throughput Issues: One of the biggest concerns that airport executives have with the wide-scale deployment and utilization of AIT equipment is passenger throughput levels. While wait times at screening checkpoints are currently manageable in most cases, airports see a potential storm brewing with new equipment, new divestiture procedures, and steadily increasing passenger levels as the economy recovers.

Airport executives question the optimistic assumptions that TSA has made in this area, and we urge the agency to begin serious contingency planning to deal with slower processing times and increasing passenger levels. Airports have long supported the establishment and adherence to

specific wait time thresholds at airports and believe that this important tool – which TSA no longer measures – should be reinstituted.

On the throughput issue, airport executives have placed a great emphasis on TSA efficiency to improve the experience of passengers at airports. Improved customer service is clearly an important consideration. In our view, however, improving the efficiency of the screening process goes hand-in-hand with the goal of enhancing the security and safety of airport facilities and the aviation system. Long lines and poor customer service do not equate to better aviation security. To the contrary, long lines in airport terminals and at security screening checkpoints are targets for terrorists as past experiences prove.

Long Term, Focus Must Move Beyond Finding Dangerous Things: It is clear that terrorists continue to focus on commercial aviation as a primary target and that the threats are evolving at an increasingly rapid pace. As local airports and DHS continue to work together to address these emerging novel attacks, it is a well established imperative that the federal government maintain an active pipeline of the latest innovative technologies to stay a step ahead while supporting a healthy and efficient aviation system. However, our collective detection, deterrence and response capabilities, as advanced and accurate as they are, will only take us so far as we attempt to combat a new generation of terrorists and methods apparent in the attempted Christmas Day attack.

Looking forward, we must continue our efforts to focus on identifying dangerous people in addition to dangerous things. With the deployment of AIT equipment at numerous airport locations, we have virtually reached the limits of our ability to identify dangerous things at screening checkpoints. While additional detection capabilities are certainly critical, we must also seek to do ever more to identify those who intend to do our aviation system and nation harm and to continue to develop a broad array of approaches to subject potential threats to additional scrutiny. Similarly, we must do more to better align security resources to address appropriately those in the traveling public that pose little threat to the system.

Part of the answer in the long-run is to integrate into a seamless approach the many security tools at our disposal that operate now largely in isolation. It is no longer enough for TSA to research and deploy new physical threat detection technologies, vet traveler's backgrounds against terrorist databases and unpredictably screen and observe travelers in terminal and gate areas. While these programs have made us more secure over the past eight years, the fact that they currently operate largely independent of each other creates limitations. Ultimately, we must tie all of these tools together to create a more targeted application of screening processes and a true risk-based approach.

We look forward to working with the subcommittee as efforts in that regard continue. Again, I appreciate the opportunity to participate in today's hearing and look forward to answering any questions you have.